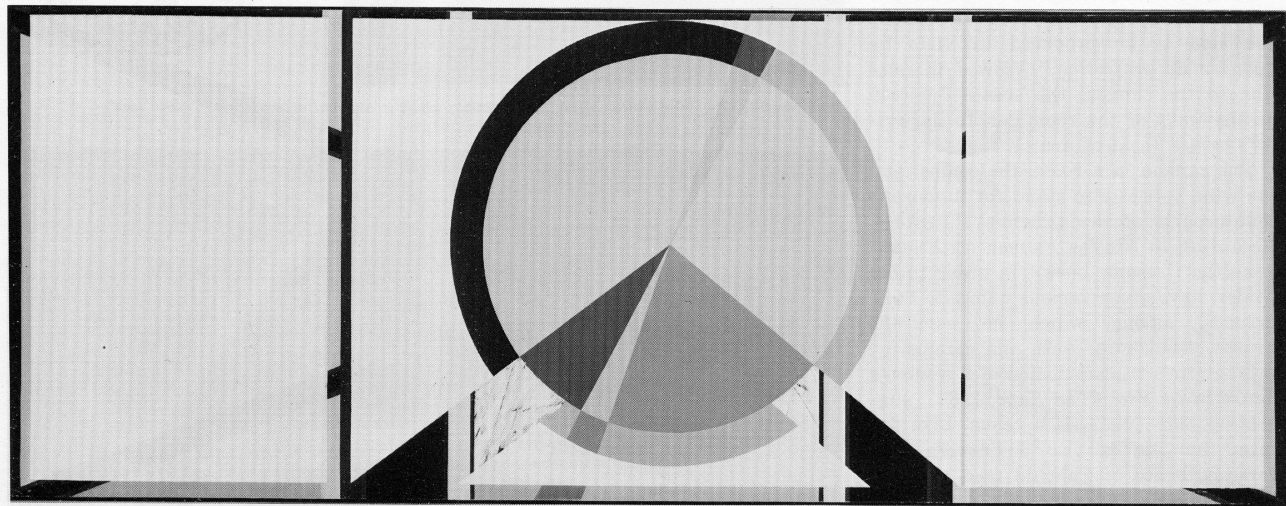


CONCEPT VS. ART OBJECT

A Conversation between Douglas Huebler and Budd Hopkins



Budd Hopkins, *Libra* (1972), 38 x 100", oil on canvas. Courtesy Zierler Gallery.

This dialogue is a confrontation between a conceptual artist, Douglas Huebler, and a painter, Budd Hopkins. Their discussion took place last summer on a Cape Cod beach and, although the two men had known each other for many years, this was the first time they had examined their work from their divergent positions.

The five hours of conversation were edited by April Kingsley, Assistant Curator of the Pasadena Art Museum.

Budd Hopkins: Doug, I'd like to set up an analogy here and see what you think. Now, you have a concept going, and your data (photographs, typewritten sheet, etc.) are all, in a sense, little arrows pointing toward a quality of Hueblerness; they're the residue, the evidence. Now, take Vermeer; we have about thirty-five paintings or so, and we know that he's into something that is never really there in any one work either. It's a Platonic thought. All we ever have is the evidence in each case. We can know or deduce historical facts, psychological sets, sociological information, etc., to elucidate that evidence, but we're not really going to be able to get at the center of Vermeer's concept or yours except from the paintings or your documents. That's all we have left to judge by, what's left behind.

Douglas Huebler: I was thinking about his choice of making a single picture and my choice of using a series of photographs, which don't really have to be used at all. He selects a view, and it's the same one over and over—that's the Vermeeriness. I can speak about my intentions, and they are meant to be implicit in the work, about picturing. Though I'm not making a specific picture, it's very clear that I have chosen, framed, made a model, but that it is only one of many possible models or frames. I can insist that I am choosing to make all phenomena available to be the resources of the human response. My intentions are to open up the phenomena again, by removing the aesthetic base that has held them together.

B.H. In most of the conceptual art I've seen the ideas seem to me to be as dumb as, say, the apples in a dish Cézanne paints, and I find myself coming back to the idea of Vermeer paintings as the evidence spun off from his conceptual position—which we agree an artist never states in its entirety in any one work—so I end up thinking that there's no such thing as conceptual art in any broad sense. What we seem to have is the concept as subject matter, like the apples in Cézanne's dish, and the evidence being what the conceptual artist leaves for me to read, or the Cézanne painting or the Vermeer. Are there any differences,

philosophically, do you feel?

D.H. No, I quite agree that the painting, the photographs, whatever, are the residue of the artist's activity which leads back to his concept. But it's a matter of intentions, and it isn't fair to judge the visual manifestation unless that's what the artist intended you to do. Art is not necessarily about painting or sculpture, and a conceptual artist who gets involved in making things that begin to look like painting or sculpture weakens his position and confuses the issue.

B.H. I think that the issue really is that painting and sculpture are a certain class of objects that you're not involved in directly, that you're operating with by analogy in your work. They are objects that convey information, more or less depending on the artist, but the information component isn't necessarily concentrated upon. In conceptual art, it seems to be. But if you force the object to rely on its informational content for its meaning, you may end up with something that's not going to be very interesting over the long haul. The other sense of an object, its otherness, is more interesting to me. It's much more ambiguous, in the sense that it allows for anyone looking at it to read it in many different ways, and people always do, and it manages to touch all sorts of emotional bases. I really believe that the

Douglas Huebler, Variable Piece

#70 (In Process) Global:
Throughout the remainder of the artist's lifetime he will photographically document, to the extent of his capacity, the existence of everyone alive in order to produce the most authentic and inclusive representation of the human species that may be assembled in that manner.

Editions of this work will be periodically issued in a variety of topical modes: '100,000 people', '1,000,000 people', '10,000,000 people', 'people personally known by the artist', 'look-alikes', 'over-laps', etc.

In November, 1971 a number of photographs were made in New York City to document various aspects of "everyone alive"; from those one was selected to represent: MORE THAN ONE PERSON WHO APPEARS TO EXPERIENCE THE EXISTENCE OF THE ARTIST. That photograph and a contact proof print join with this statement to constitute the form of this work: 4/ Variable Piece #70:1971

November, 1971



greater the ambiguity in a work of art, the greater the art. And this has to do with Malraux's thing about a work of art not speaking a monologue with history, but a dialogue.

D.H. None of my photographs were ever meant to be a recovery of an art object or an art activity. They were a proposition of the possibility of making a fabrication out of that particular moment, but, obviously, I'll suck into your word ambiguous, and say I agree, that's what I intended by making an either/or alternative proposition in all my works. It is like this is only at that given moment. The information is specific, but the construction is meant to be absolutely open. When I say I want to release all phenomena, including the appearance of things, this or that particular view, I mean that all of it is mere happenstance according to the structure I give out. Meaning is the construct that is imposed upon the undifferentiated manifestation of all reality. The work I do doesn't propose things that aren't known. You can find the precedents for the things I believe in as my way of trying to be alive in old Eastern philosophy. I'm really a second-rate Zen Buddhist. All I'm trying to do is to put those feelings of the ongoing, open nature of all phenomena, and your experience with them, into an art context in a way that I don't think has been done. I just choose to make an

image, a residue, documentation, rather than to make painting or sculpture. I am trying to say this is the way I feel the world is, that it can be refreshed, that it can be original again by being released from some of the models of reality we've had pressed on us that may no longer be relevant. So, I'm for openness, ambiguity. I'm for the percipient filling-in the content of the piece, given the model I set up, and I would say that, in a way, that's what Vermeer was doing.

B.H. You're saying that you're up to the same thing, but that you're not interested in a particular medium. I am, and one of the reasons is because that medium, painting, has an incredibly rich history, and whenever I paint a painting it has to do with all other paintings that have ever been painted, it picks them up instantly with thousands of overtones. To me, it's like plugging into one of the richest existing circuits, which has to be a net gain in raw material. I think of painting as a metaphor that deals with many, many complex issues simultaneously. I can conceive of creating time in a painting, and I try to do this by a situation where illusionistic elements are used to suggest a sequence of time—that what is clearly paint right on top of the canvas is immediately present, in terms of time, and areas which seem to be located behind that picture plane suggest past time, and forms that seem to float

in front of the picture plane imply some kind of movement into the future. But that's just one set of things that are going on metaphorically in the paintings. For instance, I use the circle to establish a clear hierarchy, which is, to me, the most primitive and basic way to deal with the world psychologically. It establishes the continuum from most important and central to most marginal and least important. It can function like the head in a Rembrandt, as the center of magic and power, as the vessel we fill with our sense of awe. My vocabulary of forms can go from a suggestion of speed in an interstellar sense to the architectural stability of a Byzantine icon, because the richness of the medium's history, and its ambiguity, and its otherness allows all this to co-exist.

D.H. Your description about your interest in painting makes a particular model—the utterance of your language. I can argue that unless there is at least a primary model that you are concerned with, that you have uttered in some way extra to your painting, your audience might not understand your intentions or your meaning. I make my intentions clear to the viewer in the simplest, most effective way by incorporating the language that defines them right into the body of the work. You can change normal sensory experience, change the conceptual model, by changing the language.

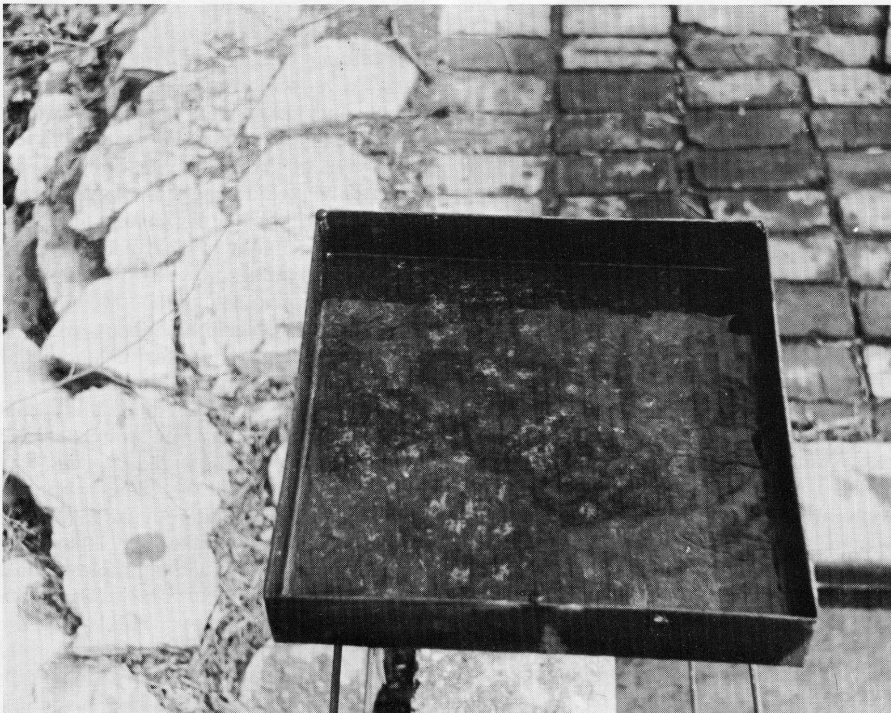


Douglas Heubler, Location Piece #7

Bradford, Massachusetts – Oxford, Ohio

During the morning of February 10, 1969, an amount of snow was removed from its location in Bradford, Massachusetts, melted and placed inside a closed container which was then flown to Oxford, Ohio where (during that same afternoon) it was poured into an open container and allowed to evaporate.

A photograph of each location joins with this statement to constitute the form of this piece. February, 1969.

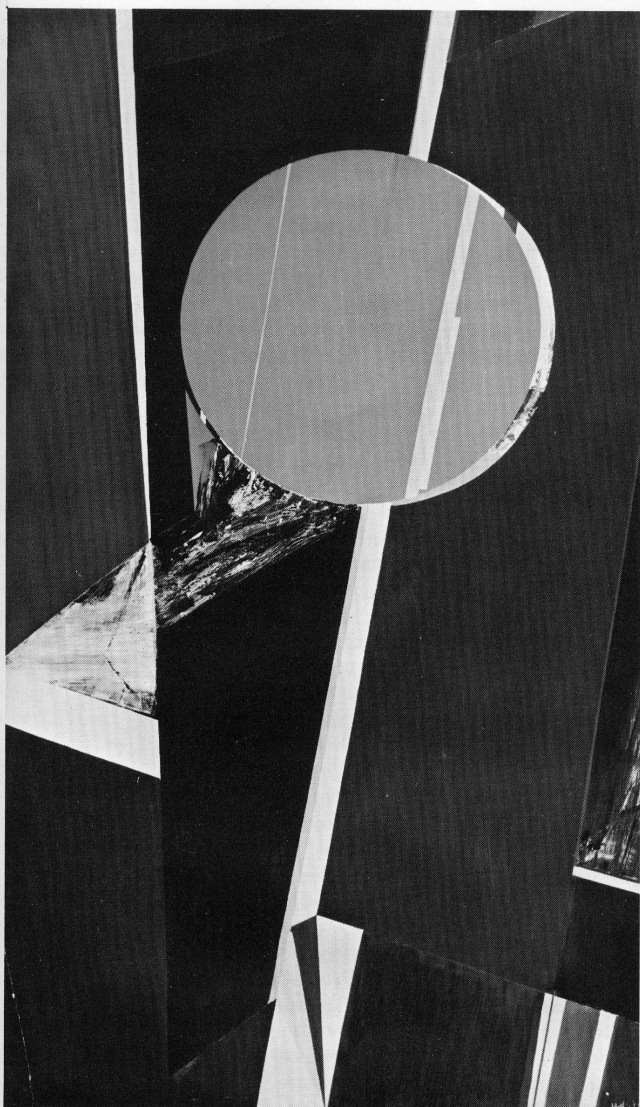


This happens in my dot and line pieces, my photographs, and many other things I've done where the language is a very strong instructing force. It's very important that the words occupy the same space with the image and become part of it. That's part of the complexity and richness of my work, that a lot of people miss, I think.

B.H. Your difficulty in working with your medium is that you have to, in a sense, establish all the circuits from the ground up for your medium. The basic thing for me about being a painter is not only that all sorts of circuits are built-in which establish a pre-existing self-referential system for me to use, or the myriad possibilities for my forms, and colors, and pictorial space to have metaphorical meaning, but the fact that when I'm finished what finally exists is an object which doesn't change, except as people read it and bring their different needs to it as time goes on. This is part of the excitement for me, that there's no correct reading for a painting. I want that kind of mystery.

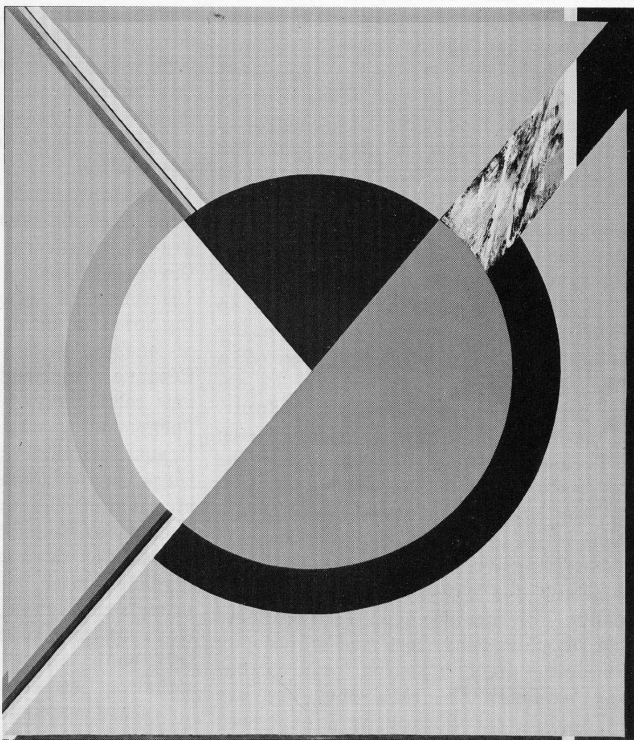
D.H. If I just show drawings or photographs people might make judgements about the quality of them. But since my intention in using them is to insist that there is no necessary magic within the nature of appearance, no privileged way to view the world, I use language within the work to release the photographs or drawings from carrying the burden of being anything about aesthetics. The words allow the visual signs, which are always the least possible, to return as themselves to the world, as only some things that were appropriated mechanically. That way they can be fresh again, and the people who see them can see them freshly again, too. But I'm not directing attention to the particular nature of my point of reference.

B.H. In your case people have to be interested in going into a gallery and reading the material you're presenting, looking at the drawings or photographs, and puzzling out the conceptual model you've provided for them, and then the world has been renewed for them through your particular medium and something magical has happened. I'm very limited in what I can do by my particular medium because what I can do is only available to people who are involved with painting. The work provides an enlivening experience for them, and their world has a new order and beauty, and they're able to live more intensely for the moment. But, because I choose to paint I have the whole language of art to help me convey my meaning to people. Your mediums, and I have this idea that what you're into is really a media collage, are loaded with over-



Left: **Budd Hopkins, Pamplona** (1967), 91 x 52", oil on canvas. Collection Mr. Arnold Katy.

Below: **Budd Hopkins, Aquarius IV** (1971), oil on canvas. Courtesy Zierler Gallery.



tones of books, school, testing, surveys, exercises and so on, that can't be avoided, which imply a sense of didacticism which seems to have more to do with teaching than art experiences or aesthetics. In a sense, you have more problems.

D.H. Well, that's one of the reasons I jump from one thing to another, using almost anything. No single one of my works can be taken seriously as the only possibility. Any sensitive audience can see that I intend everything by a given model, not just one thing. They aren't complicated, they aren't intelligent or scientific, they aren't philosophical or psychological. I have all the information in the world, all the mythic forms ever known, everything that I'm plugged into as a human being, for my raw material. My apparent use of experience is not meant to imply anything about that particular experience. It's a conceptual model which is meant to have implications

for representation and revelation pointing toward everything else in a multi-leveled way. I'm really posing the question of renegotiation of experience, rather than saying take my experience, you see. It is important for me to use the medium in the most literal way possible, and though I mean my work to be mind-expanding and expressionistic and all kinds of beautiful things, it is didactic too.

B.H. I think that any work of art can be used to extract information, and I think the didactic thing is an aspect which can be used metaphorically. I keep coming back to the idea of the use of art, art as something to be used in a particular way that is basically emotional, a communication of highly complex emotions through a specific medium. A work of art enters life very much like another human being—complicated, loaded with overtones and meaning, mysterious, enticing, obsessive, and beautiful.

There's no way to control how it will be used, how it will be read, and that's part of the excitement of it. And, I think, that's part of my defense of the idea of objectness, the otherness of objects of art.

D.H. And my counter to that would be that I want the world to be as varied and rich as a work of art in the heads of my viewers. I want all the possibilities in the world to remain open, and I think that's a fair ambition. I think yours is a fair ambition, too. I think it works this way, that we are in an undifferentiated value system where each person strives to find some kind of meaning and people we call artists are people who are constantly proposing alternative ways of dealing with the phenomena of existence, and those things being proposed are available to be knocked over by the next proposition.